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THE TEACHING OF FRENCH.

THE reading of Mr. Lawrence C. Hull's valuable paper on Latin¹ has so repeatedly made me exclaim, "Such are my sentiments concerning the study of modern languages," that I must beg leave to borrow his words over and over again in my attempt to bring due consideration to bear upon the vital importance of certain points in the teaching of modern languages. Improvement in that direction being already under fair way in German, I shall confine my remarks to the Romance languages in general, and to French in particular.

If, for instance, one takes up any French reader prepared for the benefit of first-, second-, and even third-year school or college students, he will invariably find it provided with so complete a vocabulary that not one word in the text has escaped, and even the same word is repeated as many times as it appears differently inflected in the text. Compilers, publishers, teachers, and students seem to believe that the larger the vocabulary and the more numerous the notes, the better the book. Now, I believe that both vocabulary and notes are just the great blemish in it.

To be able to appreciate this statement, a teacher must have tried readers altogether devoid of vocabulary, beginning with the simplest of texts, leading his pupils to recognize cognates, and himself supplying the rest. Then he will know how much more quickly and effectively students learn to translate anything at sight, how much stronger is their hold on the new language, how much more forcible, easy, fluent is their rendering of it into English, and how much better, healthier, and more durable are the results obtained by bringing into play the observing and reasoning powers of students, than by appealing to mere parrot memory.

When they have discovered, after a few lines of translation,

¹"The Mastery of English by the Study of Latin," *SCHOOL REVIEW*, Vol. XI, pp. 665-776.

the near relation of the French prefixes *a-*, *de-*, *re-*, *pre-*, etc., with the same in English, and that of *-oire*, *-aire-*, *-eur*, *-ier*, *-er*, etc., with *-ory*, *-ary*, *-or*, *-er*, etc.; also that of various consonants, as *b* and *p*, with *v* and *f*, and *vice versa*; and how the Latin or old French, consequently Norman English, *l* after a vowel has collapsed into *u*, and *s* into an accent, mostly circumflex, but often also an acute or grave, as well as *d*, *p*, *t*, etc., after *e*; when they have discovered these, and a few other things the unfolding of which they watch with intense interest, the students realize how comparatively few words and phrases for the English scholar there really are in French, the meaning of which cannot be detected by a bit of hard thinking.

Compare this sort of *jeu d'esprit* with the humdrum mechanical process of listlessly turning at every word to the vocabulary to find, for instance (I copy from some of the high standard readers for schools and colleges), that *trente* is "thirty;" *trente-trois* is "thirty-three," and *trois* is "three." Turning to *quarante-quatre*, I find the following: *quarante* is "forty," *quarante-quatre* is "forty-four," *quatre* is "four," etc., etc.

But let me begin with the letter *a* in the vocabulary of a textbook enjoying an unparalleled popularity, and follow down its columns, for curiosity's sake:

FRENCH	ENGLISH
abandonner	to abandon, forsake
abondance	abundance
abondamment	abundantly
abondant	abundant
absorber	to absorb
absurde	absurd
abuser	to abuse, to make a bad use of
académique	academic
accent	accent, tone
accepter	to accept
accident	accident, incident
acclimater	to acclimatize
accompagner	to accompany
accoupler	to couple, fasten
accoutumer	to accustom, habituate
accuser	to accuse, blame, reproach

FRENCH	ENGLISH
acteur	actor
action	action
actuellement	now, at this very time
addition	addition; also: bill, reckoning
adjurer	to adjure, beseech
admettre	to admit
admirer	to admire
admirablement	admirably
adresse	address, skill
adresser	to address
adversaire	adversary, opponent

As for the notes, I see, for instance, that I am referred to one after the phrase *âgé de dix ans*. The "Vocabulary" tells me that *âgé* is "aged," *de* is "of," *dix* is "ten," and *an* is "year;" and the "Notes," that *âgé de dix ans* means "ten years old." Now, really, is there in all the secondary schools and colleges of these broad United States one boy or girl who could not be trusted to find that out for himself, considering the aforesaid wonderfully complete "Vocabulary," the subject of the text, the context, the analogy, and the probabilities? A student should be left to discover for himself the English for *féminin*, for example, and *précieux*, *hôte*, *amitié*, *appartenir*, *brèche*, *compagnie*, *villageois*, *poulet*, etc., etc., and be led into recognizing even such distant cousins as *institutrice*, *maigreur*, *manchette*, *apporter*, *pâtissier*, *belle-mère*, *tuilerie*, *voisinage*, etc.; also into finding, to a nicety, the exact shade of their meaning in the sentence under study.

The maze of numberless so-called idioms can be unraveled by students through the same process. All they need is to be intelligently directed. The bit of mild mental gymnastics required for the puzzling out of such little problems in linguistics is just what makes the learning of languages worth the name of study.

And as to pronunciation, the poll-parrot method and systems of imitative phonetics now in vogue are, to use the happy expression of Mr. Hull's wise friend in Detroit, simply "immoral," and, moreover, foolish. Inasmuch as in all foreign languages "every single symbol of sound stands for that sound always,"

and enunciation is governed by immutable laws of syllabication, it is "wholesome" and meet for the young student to realize that "subordination to law is the condition of success;" that "there is no trifling" with the rules for the enunciation of vowels and consonants and for the dissection of words into articulated syllables; no allowance made for "hazy notions of the functions proper to every letter of the alphabet," and to every accent, apostrophe, diæresis, cedilla; no latitude whatever for "slovenly, slipshod" handling of any of those, not even if no larger than the finest needle's point. Indeed, especially of enunciation is it true that "what is not right is wrong;" and indeed it is good, wholesome, and refining educational discipline for the tongue and lips to be compelled to the scrupulous weighing and measuring of their slightest inflections, aware, as we are, of the fact that the minutest deviation from the right line will give us a church for a cherry, a white man for a wise one, poison for fish, a wheel for a street, a madman for a fire, an ass for a year, a cushion for a cousin, hunger for a wife, and so forth; making us, in short, unwittingly perform now the most comical and now the most tragical antics.

In face of these facts it is preposterous to expect from pupils anything approaching accuracy, and the merest show of interest in the enunciation of foreign languages, with the current systems of symbolic phonetics, or word or phrase sight-reading. The clearest fruitage of such systems is the utter confusion of logic and common-sense in the student. They form a most shaky foundation whereupon to build and balance, stone by stone, rafter by rafter, the so delicate and complicated fabric of a language. There can be no wholesome mental drill, no logical tracing from cause to effect, no practice in the exact application of rules, in the effort to assimilate in the mind's eye reality with symbol, as they are pictured, for instance, in the following (copied from an otherwise rather sensible and progressive manual):

oignon = ɔɲɔ̃

au printemps = o prɛ̃tɑ̃

j'ai eu = z-e-y

encre = ɑ̃kr

champ = ʃɑ̃

conduire = kɑ̃dɥi:r

en haut = â o	campagne = kãpajɔ
ensuite = âsyit	comment = kãmũ
heureux, se = œrø, œrøɪz	qui l'ont = ki lɔ̃
chemin de fer = ʃəmẽ de fɛɪr	gare = gaɪr
crayon = krɛjɔ̃	beau, belle = bo
voici = vwasi	avec = avek
voilà = vwala	comme = kãm
montrez-moi = môtɛ mwa	est = ɛ
agneau = ajɔ	

First, it is evident that the few short, terse rules governing once for all the sounding of *an, am, en, em—on, om, ch; gn; ill*; hard and soft *g* and *c*, and a few others, constituting the whole science of French enunciation, can be learned a hundred times faster and to better purpose than the fanciful keys to those hieroglyphic symbols. And what is more, there is no truth in them. They do not approach anything like the true, accurate pronunciation; and they are the death of etymology, orthography, analogy, and of all the breadth and height and depth of the language. They make of it, in the mind's eye and on the tongue, an illiterate, shapeless, boorish, unlicked patois. They are ruthlessly murderous.

Another of their dire workings is to obliterate entirely the constant cause of hundreds of grammatical accidents—seemingly unaccountable, senseless accidents—making thus of a bulky, by far the most bulky, part of grammar an incongruous nondescript to be blindly committed to memory parrot-wise, to the better confusion of logic and common-sense. Meanwhile the *raison d'être* of almost every one of them is to be found in the utterly discarded alphabetic and syllabic code.

And the meter, rhythm, and rhyme of French verse—what becomes of them, tumbled as they are pell-mell into that chopping sea of alien waters called imitative phonetics? And what becomes of the sonorous, harmonious, and noble pace of classical prose, chiseled every line, every word of it, as if forever to be balanced before the world's audience on great actors' tongues? I defy the inventor of any phonetic system to measure with it the rhythm of a single stanza. The impossibility to do it is proof enough that there is no truth in the system. The nearest

approach to the true reading of a foreign language by means of imitative phonetics is as far from it as Mr. Dooley's English is from the king's English. And, allow me to repeat it, the true, good-for-always alphabetical and syllabical rules are learned in less time and with less work—very much less time and work—than any phonetical system.

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